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The College Presidency: An Interview with Stephen J. Nelson

Stephen J. Nelson, Bridgewater State College¹

Abstract

College presidents continue to fill prominent critical roles in colleges and universities and society. Thus an examination of the reasons for their success and failure is vital. Four major criteria are presented as a baseline for fair judgments of presidents and their leadership. Current trends in the presidency and presidential selection are explored and presented in order to increase understanding about how presidents can best “fit” the demands of these important leadership posts.

Q: This is your third book about the college presidency. How has your thinking changed and what is it that you say in the book?

SJN: My thinking has not so much changed as it has shifted in focus. I begin by highlighting what I call the “moral voice” of college presidents—the moral and ethical basis of their public rhetoric. It is not surprising that today’s presidents must confront ideological controversies in the academy: thus my desire to unravel how presidents deal with the battleground of creeds and convictions in the academy, the theme of my previous book. In *Leaders in the Crossroads* I offer my ideas about the puzzle of what constitutes success and failure in the presidency. This interest fits into the bigger picture of a larger quandary: How and why any leader, be he or she the President of the United States, a corporate sector baron, or any other high-profile public figure, succeeds and fails. All my thinking about the college presidency reflects a common thread of assumption: That college presidents remain exceedingly influential figures on the landscape inside the gates of colleges and universities and in the public square of American society. I part company with the many who believe that college presidents are passé, that today’s leaders in the Ivory Tower are mere shadows of the giants of old who preceded them, that because presidents are forced to do nothing other than raise money and function as politicians, they no longer have anything of consequence to say. I believe that the evidence is quite the contrary. My work intentionally underscores prominent roles presidents still have, in fact never lost—roles they should continue to play.

Q: What do you contend are the keys to success and failure in these presidents?

SJN: There are four major pivotal points. First, presidents must embrace the legacy of their predecessors and the fundamental mission of the college or university they lead. They must recognize and publicly acknowledge this critical aspect of the presidential post. The institution is not about them. The highly espoused “vision” of the president, like that of any leader, must take its lead and foundation from institutional principles, beliefs, and values. Barack Obama has a

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vision. However, it is first rooted in core ideas of the Constitution, in the heritage not only of America and its story, but also of the broad arch imprint of his predecessors, good and bad. The “vision” of any leader has to build on some foundation, and college presidents need to know that. Successful presidents and the successful colleges that appoint them stand on the vision of their institutional heritages. Second, college presidents must embrace the marketplace of ideas that is at the basis of the academy. This marketplace includes notions of free inquiry, debate, and speech and the pushes and pulls of people and ideas that are fundamental to the college and university and its vitality and legacy. Next, presidents must use fully but wisely the platform of their bully pulpits. From their pulpits they are able to advocate in and outside the gates questions and issues of critical interest and importance. Presidents must take this responsibility with the utmost seriousness and bring their intellectual wherewithal into this arena where among other things they meet and contend with the key ideological forces. Last, while crises do not inevitably cross the path of every president, any crisis both large and small must be well handled. Presidencies have succeeded and failed in the crucible of crisis. Examples of the cul de sac of crisis for presidents are vast and numerous. But overall, the broad brushes that paint the narrative of presidents and determine much of their success and failure rest on these four fronts.

Q: How do you draw conclusions regarding who make successful and unsuccessful presidents? You are judge and jury? Are you fair?

SJN: I have studied presidents in earnest as a scholar, thinker, and writer for more than a decade and a half. By some accounting that is a short period of time. First, I have profound respect for anyone who tackles this job. I have pointed out on numerous occasions that it is at least as demanding and likely vastly more so than that of the CEOs of any national or international corporate giant or entrepreneurial venture you can name. But it is also exceptionally rewarding, gratifying, and inspiring. First, presidents must manage bureaucracies, work highly politicized environments populated by tremendously bright and resourceful people who include faculty particularly but also trustees, alumni, friends, and not least students. They must handle massive physical plants and the financial wherewithal and fundraising that keep the whole enterprise going, be leaders and shapers of communities, speak eloquently, and in the case of public university and college presidents, manage the slings, arrows, disasters, and fortunes of government, politicians, and the citizen, taxpaying populace. Second, most presidents get into the game for the right reasons, even if once in it they suffer second thoughts. Most of those involved do so for the best reasons and intentions, even if there are the occasional appointments that end up as misfits for specific institutions or those simply miscast for the presidential role. Some presidents suffer overwhelming cases of “beware what you wish for,” often having to face the choice or having it made for them that they best find other lines of work, in some cases returning as professors or lower level administrators. But for sure there are those who fail as presidents for all manner of reasons. These are presidents who get hedged in by circumstances that if handled differently, might have been controlled or at the least minimized.

Q: So what should we know, especially what should those responsible for selecting presidents know, about how the “fit” can be made as well as possible and the crystal ball gazing of candidates lead to the appointments of those with at least a reasonable chance of success?

SJN: Most simply put, the best road to success in presidential appointments and for those presidents who are granted the opportunity to serve is for the college or university to place its mission and purpose in the forefront. In history, footprint and aspiration, what is the place? What

is it about? Why does it exist? Following that foundational course, they can then answer the questions and try to get the match of a leader who will fit that trajectory. Yes, the qualities of that leader and potential president, as I have mentioned, are also critical. How do the presidential candidates view the bully pulpit and what have been their track records in using it? It should be noted in this regard that faculty members and deans as well as upper level administrators from whom these presidents are generally drawn have had their own bully pulpits of one sort or another, and they should be using it. Thus on this front there should be a track record. What do the persons who would be president think about the colleges they aspire to lead? How do they articulate their interests, “vision” if you will, and how does all of that match up with the place, not the other way around? How much do they *really* believe in the foundation stones of the university—free inquiry, a place that intentionally cannot and should not be politically correct, a place that welcomes all comers—rather than merely paying lip-service to these time honored and essential values and beliefs? What is their track record of standing on that foundation and how do they argue that this is their chosen platform if fortunate enough to become your president? If these, and many other bases and characteristics of a good president are covered, then there is a more than fair chance of reasonable or even high success.

Q: You do not mention the much-talked about and presumed importance of fund-raising?

SJN: There is no way that colleges and universities are going to avoid the hunt-for-dollars game, and that means that presidents of necessity have to be in that game. They will have to raise money, conduct major capital campaigns—what now has become what I call the almost rolling or continual crusade of fundraising—whether presidents and their institutions engage in a major campaign or are simply going about the year-in and year-out task of pulling in dollars. So I understand that fundraising is part of the responsibility of presidents. On the other hand, I do not believe it has to be the only thing. Frankly when fundraising and money-seeking are the only things, then presidents fail on many other essential commitments and responsibilities for which they must be held accountable. The presidential voice in the public square must not fall by the wayside simply because the perception is that so much time is needed for investment in the hunt for dollars. Even worse, a donor or group of donors attempting to force silence as a quid pro quo for financial support and contributions should never compromise or muzzle the capacity of a president to speak publicly and engage ideas on and off the campus. Such behavior is a form of the worst blackmail, and no president should go idly to the sidelines and let that stand. Fundraising can and should be put in its place, and frankly I subscribe to an earlier model—that the development and fundraising should be delegated primarily to the pros on that front. These presidents use their office to engage the larger development enterprise that underscores the value and importance of the school, what it is doing, why it should exist, what difference it is making and the like. This is the “case” that will then draw people to come forward with their dollars and contributions.

Q: Do you see any overall trends in what we have and what we might expect in our college presidents in the future?

SJN: There are a couple of critical trends that have developed recently or in some cases probably simply come more to the fore after being slightly submerged for a time. First and most important, there is evidence that a number of presidents are coming to the helm with a record of fewer arduous years of work in administration and leadership. There has been a presumption, maybe for decades if not longer, of presidents climbing the ladder, moving early on from faculty positions and working in academic (and other administrative) positions to provostships, deans of major

schools, or colleges of universities and the like. However, colleges are beginning to go after as presidents those who are intellectual and academic forces in their own right. In some cases these presidents are coming to office at slightly, if only marginally, younger ages. After all we now have a president of the nation in his mid-late 40s who is surrounding himself with many, though by no means all, advisors and appointments of his age cohort. A “trend” of public intellectual and academician-scholar presidents has been with us since the era of presidents with similar backgrounds in the early twentieth century. Especially now, more presidents have continued as professors, writers, and researchers into and including their presidencies. But in its latest iteration, this emerging trend of presidential profile and portfolio supplants the gathering notion of the last few decades of the latter twentieth century when a major emphasis was that the college president had to function like a CEO and therefore needed to possess that type of administrative background. In addition, and more importantly, this “new” trend pushes back against the notion that presidents must carry themselves more as executive leaders, displacing that misguided assumption with the idea that they can and should be intellectual, academic forces and voices.

Q: Based on what you know and your thinking, what else do you believe to be critical about the college presidency as we look down the road of the future?

SJN: I am convinced that we are going to see more and more colleges and universities choose presidents from those who are professors, faculty members, and deans or other upper level administrative positions. Presidents need to be able to be true leaders of faculty colleagues, to be seen as being dedicated to the world of the professorate, and be able to embrace and convey to many publics the educational, academic, scholarly, intellectual, inquiry, and research foundations at the heart of the academy. Along those lines, and I make this argument in *Leaders in the Crossroads*, presidents need to make broad contributions to the fundamental foundations, beliefs, and values of the university writ large. That is, the university stands for something in society. It is not simply just another institution, organization, or political (the worst change that contemporary ideological forces threaten to foist on it) creation. The university is different. It is and needs in the best sense to be an Ivory Tower. Thus presidents must be about this business of upholding the basis of the university, not being exclusively riveted on the business side of the university. More and more presidents will, I believe, try to continue teaching even if only one course per year. That is difficult to do, but by no means impossible. I have a proposition, yet to be further explored, that one of the major tests of the success and failure of presidents is whether they bolster, secure, and build up through their exercise of leadership these foundation stones of the university, or wittingly or not erode and corrode that foundation, one that I consider sacred and thereby a sacred trust that presidents have an incumbent responsibility to uphold.

Q: Does what you think make you an optimist or a pessimist about what we will have as our presidents of the future?

SJN: I am quite optimistic, though guardedly so. The primary swing in my thinking is governed by the degree to which the assertions that I make are on point and that others might find them so. I hope that my recommendations for what we should look for in presidents will be taken seriously and will help shape the future of the college presidency.
